

SYMPHONY REVIEW
Music For 18's Spell,
A Zeppelin in Video Opera

June 17, 00

Steve Reich

By Thomas Goss

At its best, minimalist composition is a craft more akin to painting than to writing. Organization of cumulative details involves obsession with color. Devising elemental patterns of rhythm demands an elevated understanding of line that courts the fractal or pointillist. This approach was much in evidence at Saturday's American Mavericks performance of Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* at Davies Symphony Hall. Briskly reflected points of plink and clunk laid down a bright wash from a double quartet of pianos and marimba/xylophones. Broad sweeps of pulsing texture cascaded through the catchy, slowly evolving cross-rhythms.

The musicians were as tight as a welded bolt in this performance of the 50-minute work, executing with nonrobotic fluid accuracy the unrelenting grooves and riffs. An element of suspense hung over the task of indulging so hypnotic and lengthy an exercise and not dropping a cue. The warm center of violin, cello, and two single reeds (doubling on soprano, alto, and bass clarinets) blended well with the natural, open soprano quartet, whose vocalizations drifted dreamily over the chatter of mallets and felts.

The audience synched right up to the music, too spellbound to twitch, whisper, or cough. By the end of the quickly fleeting hour, a mild virus of head-bobbing had infected half the audience. The triple curtain call, to standing applause, that followed the gradual, subtle cutoff was more than a gesture of appreciation of mastery and sorcery. It was an acknowledgement of the suspension of moment in which we all had participated.

Reich's collaboration with videographer Beryl Korot, *Hindenburg*, received the dubious honor of following this tough act, which it did with distinction. In his "Documentary Video Opera" Korot weaved a tapestry of images on a screen divided into multiple panels, to the energetic and synergetic score. Flaming headlines and hydrogen marched across the screen to martial snare tattoos as tenors repeated in triple canon the assertion of the German ambassador: "It could not have been a technical matter" (also the title of the first scene).

The ill-fated zeppelin crashed over and over, slowing in agony to the frantic yet equally retarding voice of the famous radio broadcaster who broke the news live. "Mythic Stature" underlined the mechanistic nature of 1930s German militarism, with flowing shots of marching soldiers interspersed with Depression soup kitchen horror. The gleaming, full-color image of President Hindenburg jerked across the screen, startling my color sense, which had acclimated to the black-and-white footage.

"Nibelung Zeppelin" borrowed a leitmotif from Wagner, in ironic homage to the

system of ideals with which Nazi Germany attempted to imbue every aspect of their technological achievements. The music suggested a mechanism of the constructive kind as silhouettes of workmen looped to the task of building the airship to a chattering clack that started on high percussion and pooled out through the rest of the ensemble. The drone of the craft's engines served as pedal point to the eerie sung chords and slowly shifting harmony that accompanied "A very impressive thing to see," a short scene dedicated to images of the launching and sailing of the dirigible.

The words of the title "I couldn't understand it" became the mantra that closed the work, set to an insistently halting rhythm that called to mind the stagger of the captain who spoke those words as he crawled from the wreckage. Aerial shots lovingly panned through the charred blot of jetsam as the device of triple canon returned over a stretched announcer's voice.

As documentary, the piece relied on subtext and implication to make its points. As opera, the literal meaning of this Italian word ("works") was necessary to justify its use. No one got the girl or was cast into the pit at the end. Still, the smaller story of a clumsy disaster sufficed as story line to support the setting of words to music. But as video it was a remarkable achievement, and well justified the intentions of its creator to incorporate new freedoms into the medium of screen arts.

At the postconcert talk, moderated by MTT, the co-creators revealed that their method of developing the work involved setting a time-coded framework for each scene and then working separately on the ideas, later putting them together. They denied setting music to images or vice versa. To me, this manner of collaboration seems unnecessarily insular, as well as clumsy beyond belief. On the other hand, with results like these, it seems worth it.